

Jackson Sun (TN)

Grant to help fight domestic abuse

By Rachel Myer

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A West Tennessee nonprofit organization will use a \$300,000 federal grant to hire an attorney and a Spanish-speaking paralegal to help provide legal assistance to domestic violence victims.

The U.S. Department of Justice two-year grant will begin Oct. 1, which is the start of domestic violence awareness month.

U.S. Rep. John Tanner announced Monday that the grant was awarded to West Tennessee Legal Services of Jackson. The organization provides legal assistance and advocacy in 17 counties.

"This award will offer assistance as we look for whatever ways possible to stop domestic violence and help the women, men and children who are victims of abuse," Tanner said in a news statement.

The organization doesn't have a staff member who speaks Spanish and the need is increasing with growing Hispanic populations, said the organization's executive director Steven Xanthopoulos.

He estimated the money will help handle at least another 180 cases next year. The group closes about 2,500 cases a year.

The money was timed well because the legal group had recently lost about \$120,000 in grant money due to a decrease in the poverty population in West Tennessee in Census 2000, Xanthopoulos said.

"The drop in poverty is a good thing, but there is still a great need out there," he said. "So this was a very good thing."

Having legal representation at divorce and child custody hearings is important in helping victims leave abusive and sometimes dangerous situations, said Margaret Cole, executive director of Wo/Men's Resource and Rape Assistance Program in Jackson. Her organization and Northwest Safeline are partners in the grant. Northwest Safeline, based in Dyersburg, is a family violence intervention project that serves Dyer, Obion, Lake and Crockett counties.

The grant also will help victims go through court proceedings after losing a job or being evicted because of an abuser's actions, Xanthopoulos said.

"It's going to help the victims, but it's also going to help their children," he said.

More than 270 domestic violence assaults in Madison County were reported last year, according to Tennessee Bureau of Investigation statistics. In Jackson, more than 730 domestic violence assaults were reported last year, according to records.

"Domestic violence is certainly on the increase and we need to do something to curve that. I see this as helping that," Madison County Sheriff David Woolfork said of the grant.

Domestic violence accounted for five of 12 murders in 2001 in Jackson, police have said. And the increase in calls prompted Jackson Police Chief Rick Staples in March to form a focus group to determine if police officers need to make changes in their response to domestic calls.